

Book Review

Review of *The Culture of Extinction: Toward a Philosophy of Deep Ecology* by Frederic L. Bender. Humanity Books, an imprint of Prometheus Books, 2003.

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Frederic Bender presents an overview of the fall of humans from nonduality into dualism, nihilism, and overshoot.

Bender credits radical environmentalist Christopher Manes with coining the phrase “culture of extinction.” Bender says:

This idiom captures the fact that industrial society’s assault on the ecosphere, a.k.a. anthropogenic impact, is as destructive as the meteorite that caused the extinction of the dinosaurs. We of the culture of extinction treat Earth as if it were an infinite sink for our pollutants and wastes. (p. 17)

Bender uses the word ecocide “. . . to describe the culture of extinction’s systematic assault on the ecosphere.”

He concludes that ecocide is the result of anthropocentrism and human chauvinism embedded in religious and philosophical errors.

According to Bender, these errors are not found among primal peoples. Because of their nondualist worldviews, they know how to enjoy life and do not fear death.

How did modern humans fall into dualism, fear of death, nihilism, and overshoot?

Overshoot means exceeding the capacity of natural systems to sustain collective human exploitation of nature. Bender traces a broad sweep of philosophical and social changes beginning with the transition of Paleolithic, hunter-gatherer societies into agricultural societies. Societies, especially Western societies, developed patriarchy and Western philosophy beginning with early Greek philosophy, devalued

nature and developed nihilistic worldviews. “Four dogmas—subjectivism, reductionism, noncognitivism, and relativism—jointly define a conceptual scheme as nihilistic. Closely associated with these are four moral standpoints—moral realism, the “might makes right” doctrine, incipient fascism, and ethical hedonism . . .”(p. 156).

Bender summarizes and then proceeds to dissect major arguments that have been used for centuries to justify human domination of nature. These include various forms of human chauvinism including the “natural need” and “human superiority” arguments. He also dissects the “cornucopian argument,” that Earth provides unlimited resources for human consumption, and the “sanctity-of-capitalism” argument that says capitalism is necessary for ever-increasing human happiness. Bender concludes that all these arguments are based on anthropocentrism and each argument has inconsistent premises, false conclusions, and hypocritical statements.

Continuing his themes, Bender critically analyses anthropocentrism in the Hebrew Bible, and Christians’ war on paganism. Moving through modern philosophy at a rapid pace, Bender criticizes John Locke for his failure “. . . to see that nature has a biological value much more basic than any anthropocentric or economic value we might assign it” (p. 222). Modern science is criticized for attempting to reduce nature to mathematical formulas.

Bender praises Nietzsche, who he concludes, “. . .more than any other philosopher, understood that the culture of extinction’s Graeco-Judaeo-Christian heritage, modernism included, is nihilistic.” (p.267) Nietzsche’ according to Bender, holds out hope to us.

Nietzsche, in other words, holds out for us the hope that, by being faithful to the earth, we might complete the nihilist dialectic and create a world that overcomes the culture of extinction’s original sin: “too little joy.” That is, by being faithful to the earth we might simultaneously address the culture of extinction’s twin flaws: nihilism and overshoot. Unfortunately, many of our environmentalist movements frame the idea of living in faithfulness to Earth quite joylessly, as yet another set of obligations piled onto our already otiose sense of guilt—due to Platonism and Christianity—for being earthly. One part of the environmental movement—deep ecology—recognizes the crucial need for an aesthetic of joyful finitude. (p. 299)

Bender reviews the limitations of reform and radical environmentalism, arguing that both streams of thought are still embedded with dualistic assumptions and view nature primarily as a collection of natural resources which can be exploited for human use in less destructive ways than are currently used in industrial societies.

However, the Gaia hypothesis challenges natural scientists “. . . to engage in a kind of thinking that recognizes each part as a manifestation of the whole and also as a unique nexus of relationships.” Thus “the Gaia hypothesis gives ecology a rigorous nondualist basis” (p. 381).

Bender asserts that Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess’ 1972 declaration, “The Shallow and Deep, Long-range Ecology Movement,” proclaims a non-dualistic worldview that “. . . combines Paleolithic sensibility, nondualist metaphysics and spirituality, ecology, and recognition of the need for struggle” (p. 404).

After his 1972 declaration, however, Bender concludes that Naess, and some of his American supporters, including George Sessions, back away from nondualism and compromised some of his fundamental principles.

Naess’ defined the term ecosophy, a combination of ecology as Sophia(wisdom), as “philosophy as impacted by ecological concerns.” Ecosophies contain ultimate premises, which cannot be demonstrated, norms, and statements expressing claims of appropriate human relationship with nature. Accepting, internalizing, an ecosophy based on nondualism requires mindfulness practice.

This is not very different from mindfulness practices found among the world’s spiritual traditions, like Taoism and Buddhism . . . Transformation occurs as you grasp deeply, ‘in your bones,’ that you are manifest nature and a node in the hugely complex web of natural relationships. When dualism no longer holds you in its grip, notions such as “no single being can be self-actualized unless and until all are” . . . or “when the culture of extinction destroys the integrity of my place, it is attacking me” make perfect sense. (p. 424)

Bender disputes the claim by Naess and George Sessions that the deep ecology platform can be derived from all kinds of “ultimate premises.” Bender contends that deep ecology cannot be derived from dualistic worldviews such as Christianity.

Bender argues that times have changed since 1972. More and more people are willing to embrace and embody nondualism and to accept the demands for social justice. Therefore Bender rewrites the “platform” of deep ecology to include the following statement:

Ecological sustainability also requires peace and justice throughout the world, and recognition that quality-of-life is about more than material standard of living. Especially in the poorest countries, social justice and long-term ecological sustainability are equally necessary, if people’s material, self-preservation, rootedness, and spiritual-growth needs are to be met. (p. 449)

Bender concludes that his version of deep ecology is potentially a solution to both ecocide and nihilism.

This reviewer commends Bender for his rigorous, nondualistic interpretation of Naess. However, readers should recognize that Bender's version is one of many interpretations of Naess. Naess is famous for his "radical pluralistic" approach to philosophy. Naess' favorite philosopher is Spinoza. Naess asserts there are many valuable, and different, interpretations of Spinoza. Naess is particularly impressed with Spinoza's theory of emotions, especially positive emotions such as joy.

There are many valuable interpretations of deep ecology. Bender's nondualistic interpretation is one of them, but there are many more.

Furthermore, Bender cites or quotes from only eight of Naess' articles. Many other books and articles by Naess, developing themes relevant to the deep, long-range ecology movement were probably not available to Bender or he chose not to use those articles.

Naess wrote profusely on semantics, non-violence, Spinoza and many other philosophers before and after he published his 1972 statement "The Shallow and the Deep, Long-range Ecology Movement." He writes about his own love of nature beginning in his childhood when he looked at small insects and continuing during his long career as a mountaineer.

He revises his own work frequently, gaining insights that change the subtle meanings in his sentences.

Naess recognizes the three great social movements of the twentieth century were the peace, social justice, and ecology movements. However, he emphasizes the ecology movement because peace and social justice may be impossible on a dying planet due to global warming, rising rate of species extinction, and wars over limited supplies of fresh water. With many people, including scientists, politicians, philosophers, journalists, and other opinion leaders in denial over the basic challenges of overshoot, global warming, and rising rate of species extinction, an emphasis on ecology during the twenty-first century is even more important.

Bender and other scholars, students, and activists, will soon have a much more accessible body of Naess' work. *The Selected Works of Arne Naess*, in eleven volumes, will be published by Kluwer in 2005. Vol. 10 includes more than 50 articles, many of them previously unpublished, relating to Naess' evolving expressions of deep, long-range ecology. That volume also includes a comprehensive bibliography of his works in English.